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AMERICAN OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS:
WILLIS JUDSON BEECHER.

By Rev. Professor J. S. RIGGS,

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Prof. Willis Judson Beecher, D. D., was born April 29th, 1838, in the little town of Hampden, on the Western Reserve, in Ohio, when his father was there settled as the pastor of a Home Mission Church. The family came originally from New Haven, Conn., and the same indomitable energy which had marked the father's struggles for an education doubtless led him to undertake the arduous duties of the home missionary of those days. The account we have before us tells how, in addition to all mission duties, he gradually rendered habitable the little unfurnished house which he had bought, adding room to room largely by the labor of his own hands. Amid such humble but stimulating and ennobling surroundings began Prof. Beecher's life. His father's energy certainly reappears in him; and it began to manifest itself very early, for at the age of three little Willis read English without even having been known to learn to read, and when only nine years old, he was poring over Rollin's Ancient History, Josephus, Calmet's Dictionary and the Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. He could have been fully ready to enter Yale College at the age of twelve, but wise counsels prevailed, and his growing absorption in books was for a time prevented by interest in other things. Twice before this alteration in his son's course, his father had changed his field of labor, going first to Ellsworth, Litchfield County, Conn., where he remained five years, and then to Central New York. Declining health here warned him against the strenuous labors of the pulpit, and he purchased a farm in Vernon Centre. To the care of this all the forces of the family were called, and for a time the cause of theological education ran an imminent risk of losing one of its strongest helpers, for the ambition to



Prof. WILLIS J. BEECHER, D. D., of Auburn.

be a farmer gained in attractiveness despite the genuinely hard work which it forced upon the boys. "I became convinced that agriculture is the bed rock of the social system, and inclined to devote my life to its glorious pursuits." This was not, however, the father's desire for his son, and at the age of sixteen pressure was brought to bear upon him to renew his preparation for college. It is of interest to note that something of the old ease in study had gone when books were taken up again, but the steady habit of hard, earnest, careful work had been but strengthened, so that we are not surprised to read that he graduated from Hamilton College in 1858 as the Valedictorian of the class, and with the highest prize in the classics. Among his associates in college were Drs. Herrick Johnson, A. T. Pierson, J. H. Hall, J. A. Paine, Judge G. J. Wallace, and others who have made their mark. The same year of his graduation his father died. For three years after leaving college he was a teacher in Whitestone Seminary, near Utica, and thence he went to Auburn to take his course in theology. The same quiet, thoughtful studiousness that had marked his life in college was again very evident in his course in the seminary, and gave a forecast of what his life would be. Upon graduation from the seminary, he became a pastor at Ovid, N. Y., where he remained only two years, accepting a call at the end of that time to become Professor of Moral Science and Belles Letters in Knox College, Galesburg, Ill. He was also for two years a pastor in Galesburg, whence in 1869 he was called back to Auburn to take the Professorship of Hebrew Language and Literature in the Theological Seminary. Despite the fact that there is in this recital no account of fellowships and foreign study, so common now as part of a preparation for a professorship, there is yet that happy combination of the teacher's experience with that of the pastor, which works toward the highest efficiency in the peculiar work of a theological seminary—contact with men as well as books; a study of minds as well as thoughts—these have all through been working together toward results now so strong and helpful in Professor Beecher's life and influence. It has been the custom for the incumbent of the Hebrew Chair in Auburn Seminary upon beginning his work to contribute some

literary offering to the Board of Publication. Dr. Beecher sent them his first book, "Father Tompkins and His Bibles," a little work full of interest and instruction, and written in a careful, lucid style, characteristic of his pen. Indeed, this was by no means the beginning of his literary activity outside of merely professional work. As far back as the time when he was in college he had written various newspaper articles, and in the three years following his college course he published essays in the local papers in Waterville, Vernon, Fredonia and Utica. Student as he is, in the best senses of the word, Dr. Beecher has nevertheless had a keen and watchful interest in all the social, political and religious problems of the day. From the time he left college he has been in touch with all the important movements of the day, and sought for a clear, well-defined judgment regarding them. These judgments he has given to the world in our leading religious journals and reviews. They are characterized by a noteworthy clearness in style, sobriety and conclusiveness in statement. Such are, e. g., his articles—"Is Total Abstinence True Temperance?" in the *Presbyterian Review*, April, 1882; "The New Total Abstinence Creed," *Forum*, 1886; "A Few Thoughts on New Departures," a pamphlet published in 1884. So busy has he been in this way, that could all his publications of a general character be brought together, they would make a good-sized volume. One of Dr. Beecher's notable traits—fidelity to duty in any society or organization of which he is a member—has also brought him a vast amount of extra work. Reports, records, special papers, addresses—these would go a long way toward another volume—and yet we have not entered upon the record of his distinctive work as a professor. Here he has been indefatigable. Beside his constant contributions of careful book reviews to the *Presbyterian Review*, the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, the *Andover Review*, and the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, he has had a part in the leading articles of such periodicals as the *Princeton Review*, the *Journal of the Exegetical Society*, the *Old and New Testament Student*, *Christian Thought*, and the *Homiletic Review*. The titles of a few will indicate their character: "Chronology of Kings of Israel and Judah," *Presbyterian Review*, April, 1880;

“The Logical Methods of Professor Kuenen;” “The Historical Situation in Joel and Obadiah.” In view of the general acquaintance of students with these, we need do no more than refer to the critical acumen, mental grasp and power of discriminating statement, which they reveal. In merited recognition of his learning and judgment, he was invited to prepare a large number of articles for the *American Supplement to the Encyclopædia Britannica*. The list includes such weighty topics as “Bible,” “Canon of Scripture,” “Daniel,” “Israel,” “Pentateuch,” “Prophets,” “Septuagint,” “Tabernacle.” It does not, of course, lie within the scope of a paper like this to enter into any detailed estimate of this work. It is our purpose to call attention rather to the rich fruitage of a thoughtful mind that has been increasingly productive. And withal, we have hitherto passed by reference to all the historical matter concerning Auburn Seminary, including a General Catalogue of the Seminary which he has published. Sufficient has been written to give the reader some idea of Dr. Beecher’s mental diligence and achievement. To know his power one must follow him as he goes unhesitatingly and undeviatingly through the thick of conflicting opinions and theories to the central question, and to *that* gives a clear and independent answer, or as he opens the way step by step through tangled and obscure regions of history or interpretation. We pass to note briefly some of his qualities as a preacher, a teacher and friend. Dr. Beecher makes no claim to be an orator. His pulpit utterances command attention by reason of their thoughtfulness and evident sincerity. He usually preaches without manuscript, has his subject thoroughly in hand, and speaks in a conversational tone. He is didactic in method, quiet in manner, and leaves the hearer often to make his own application of the truth unfolded. His original, striking, truthful interpretations of Scripture fasten attention and leave lasting impressions. Had nature blessed him with such gifts as a speaker as he already possesses as a thinker, it is questionable if he could be spared from the pulpit.

Among the early impressions which a student receives from him as a teacher are those of thoroughness, fairness and ac-

curacy. There is nothing especially magnetic in his class-room; but he soon inspires confidence and the highest respect. Notably does one soon realize that he has his subject fully at command, and with the utmost fairness to all who disagree, makes clear the grounds of his own judgment. He is conservative, yet from no fear of anything but the truth itself. As earnestly and ably as he has contended with the conservative critics of the day for the unity of the Pentateuch and its Mosaic authorship, he would as willingly accept the very opposite of either of these conclusions if they could be substantiated by evidence. In his wisdom he refuses to make the truth of God dependent simply upon historical criticism; and yet he stands with the conservative side, because facts and truth seem to him to support that side. His accuracy is enviable; and yet severe as he is with himself in this regard, he is very forbearing with students who find Hebrew slow and difficult work. Naturally, he has from the students an ever-increasing esteem. In no class-room of the same department of work can students be more satisfactorily guided or helped to safe conclusions in the great biblical questions of the day. This is saying much, and no invidious comparison is meant. It is simply the estimate of an old pupil who now has the privilege of working side by side with an honored teacher.

To whom Dr. Beecher is a friend, he is a friend indeed. Genial, sincere, disposed to see the good in every man—patient, modest, faithful—such are some of his marked qualities. He is rather reticent, but helpful in advice, because cautious in judgment. He is a man of comparatively few words, but these are usually to the point, and therefore sufficient. His long service to Auburn Seminary has been a blessing in every way to the institution, and the earnest wish of all its friends is that he may yet be spared many years to carry forward the noble work which thus far has been so successfully done.